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Source: *Geography*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (January 1971), pp. 15-23
Published by: Geographical Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40567429
Accessed: 12-06-2016 22:26 UTC

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# The Challenge of the Tropics in our Teaching of Geography

R. W. Steel

ABSTRACT. The widening gap between the developing and the developed world is a central issue of our times and in schools our citizens of tomorrow should be taught about the underdevelopment of the Tropics, the poorest parts of the world. Tropical Africa is selected to illustrate lines of approach. Development is at a slow pace because there are so many environmental hazards. Realistic assessment of the economic potential must be low; the rest of the world has limited need for Tropical Africa as a source of food or other agricultural commodities and development of manufacturing and exploitation of mineral deposits influences only relatively small areas and numbers of people. Challenges are to African people to accept changes in the organization of society and in farming methods to help feed rapidly growing populations adequately; to scientists and technologists in the basic problems of maintainance of soil fertility and in the provision of implements appropriate to the technical stage of development of the farmers and to the rest of the world for an internationally mounted war on world poverty.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE? Put in the simplest and starkest of terms, it is that the Tropics are in general the least developed parts of the world. They constitute what we often call nowadays "the Developing World"—grasping, as perhaps we rightly do, at anything that gives the slightest impression of something positive happening in areas where in the past there has been little or no development, often indeed the very opposite. This Developing World is also called the "Third World"—the portion of the earth's surface and the section of mankind that is poised alongside the Capitalist World of the West and the Communist World of Eastern Europe and much of Asia: cheek by jowl in many parts of the world but with all the difference between planned and disorganized development, between affluence and poverty, between prospects and stagnation. Whether we like it or not, the Third World is there, a constant reminder to us as citizens, as geographers, as teachers, that there is a tremendous gulf between, as it were, "them" and "us": a gap moreover that tends to widen rather than to diminish, so that the Pearson Report—the World Bank report on aid and development that completed its work last year and published its findings in a book called *Partners in Development*—starts with these telling, and even haunting words: "The widening gap between the developing and the developed countries has become a central issue of our time."

Here then is a world that we cannot afford to ignore, however distasteful it may be because of the way in which it underlines the uneven distribution of the natural resources of the world and the unequal possession by man of the good things of life. As those of you who shared in the national sign-in last year—the December Declaration on World Poverty as it was widely known—will recall, the emphasis was on the fact that 20 per cent of the world's population enjoyed 80 per cent of the world's wealth and that the gap between the prosperity of this minority and the poverty of the 80 per cent of mankind who had between them only 20 per cent of the world's resources was

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becoming greater: all this at a time when through inflation, devaluation and other causes the help from the richer to the poorer countries was actually diminished in value even if not in actual amount.

This surely is the nub of the challenge of the tropical world and an overwhelming reason why we should ensure that the Tropics have a fair share of the time we devote to both world and regional problems in the geography syllabus.

What, then, are some of the fundamental geographical facts relevant to our consideration of the Developing World of the Tropics in the context of the Rich World/Poor World concept that must be fundamental to much of the international thinking of the last three decades of the twentieth century?

First, there are the essential facts about the distribution of the Underdeveloped, the Developing or the Third World—which term we choose to use does not matter very much. Most of the countries are within the Tropics, though they extend outside them, notably in the Far East, and in parts of the Middle East. They are all in Latin America, in Africa and in Asia outside the U.S.S.R. and Japan.

Secondly, there are the fundamental facts about their nature. The Gross National Product—the wealth of the countries concerned—is less than 200 American dollars per head in vast areas in Latin America, in tropical Africa, and in many parts of Asia, especially in the monsoon areas.

It is not, therefore, surprising to find that these underdeveloped lands are also the unhealthy parts of the world, where people have inadequate supplies of food, suffering often from malnutrition if not from actual starvation. The calorie intake is very low compared with the figure that is regarded as minimal in societies like our own—a daily total of at least 2700 calories. This situation very obviously ties in with the agricultural potential of such areas, and what more geographical aspect of any country is there than the consideration of its land-use problems and prospects? There is an equally obvious linkage with what is often termed medical geography when we go further and consider the nature and quality of the diets of different parts of the world. Within the Tropics, most diets are lacking in either energy values or protective values, and in many areas the diet is deficient in both.

Agriculture and food production are, therefore, very weak elements in the economy of many of these areas, yet the percentage of the working population involved in such activities is tremendous—always more than 50 per cent, often over 65 per cent, and sometimes up to 80 per cent (the comparable figure for England and Wales is well under 10 per cent). And basically the involvement is in little more than subsistence farming—the production of sufficient food for the worker and his immediate family with almost nothing surplus even for sale in the local market. An economy that does little more than grow food for home consumption is simple indeed and hardly forms the basis for any programme of development in terms of either economic production or social organization: nor is it likely to cope with an expanding population, yet this is the demographic situation that faces us today in many, if not most, parts of the Developing World.

The population problem is in fact the key issue that has to be faced. The "population explosion", as we often call it with considerable justification, will almost certainly have direct repercussions on us in the Developed World as well as on those who live in the Developing World. Explosions are no respecters of persons and certainly take no note of national or ideological boundary lines. The growth of population is something that bothers many people: even in our own islands there are some who are asking how we

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shall cope with the likely total of 70 millions by the end of the century and in particular how we shall deal with the problem of at least 60 million city-dwellers and perhaps as many as 25 million car-owners. But in fact the explosion is likely to affect countries where living standards are low much more than those where they are reasonably high. Where growth rates exceed 2 per cent per annum population doubles within a generation: where the figure is 3 or more, the doubling takes place within 17 or 18 years. The reason for such increases becomes clear if we recognize the number of children under 15: or if we look at a population pyramid showing the age and sex structure of a developing country such as Ghana, where more than 40 per cent are under the age of 15. The cumulative effect of all this is measured by the shifts in population distribution during the twentieth century, with the share of the Developed World in the total population falling from just over one-third to barely one-fifth between 1900 and the year 2000, while it is overshadowed by the dramatic rise in numbers, especially in the second half of the century, in all parts of the Developing World, whether in Asia, in Latin America or in Africa.

Perhaps Oxfam propaganda, the campaign of Christian Aid and other similar bodies, and the news items about world poverty and the various aid and development programmes of the United Nations and its special agencies—F.A.O., W.H.O., U.N.E.S.C.O. and the like—have been so successful that we now feel that we know all the facts: but have we in the process lost some of the emotion and stimulus that they roused in us earlier on? We may even be a trifle blasé about the problems of world poverty—but does this excuse us from attempting to communicate ideas about them to those whom we teach? I think not: in fact the widening gap, to which I have referred, along with the deadened consciences that are becoming increasingly obvious today, suggests to me that we need to be more active than ever before.

I want to suggest lines of approach by reference to the continent of Africa, this being the one that interests me most and that I know best at first hand. It remains the Dark Continent for many of us because we find it much easier to teach a continent with a simplicity about it like Australia or one that is full of interest and variety (and incidentally is very well served by many accessible sources of information) such as North America. Africa, if we teach it at all, comes early on in the syllabus, perhaps in the second or third year of grammar or comprehensive school study. Oddly enough, it is often taken as one of the "southern continents", notwithstanding the fact that above two-thirds of its land surface is clearly north of the Equator, and the treatment is often very general and vague. Yet it is geography in the widest sense that has helped Africa to remain "dark" and "unknown", almost "unwanted" so far as Europeans were concerned. It was a continent to be circumnavigated, to be got around, as quickly as possible, if the Portuguese were to find a route to the wealth of India and the East. They established their coastal contacts and even traded with parts of West Africa as suggested by the names of the Pepper Coast, the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast and the Slave Coast: eventually they rounded the Stormy Cape, which with good reason they renamed the Cape of Good Hope, and reached points in East Africa, like the island of Zanzibar and Malindi on the coast of what we now know as Kenya, where they took on Arab pilots who guided their ships to the west coast of India. Had penetration been easier, and the stories of the interior been more encouraging, they might have tried a little harder to go inland from the coast. But the plateau nature of so much of Africa made access to the interior very difficult only a relatively short distance inland. There were rivers, but of the major ones all but the Congo reached the sea through deltas

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which were almost impenetrable on account of the dense mangrove swamp vegetation: even on the Congo, navigation upstream was soon prevented by extensive falls and rapids where the river fell over the plateau edge to the narrow coastlands. Much later it was discovered that the markedly seasonal nature of the rainfall in many of the river basins caused flooding in a few months and very low water levels during the rest of the year, so that movement along the rivers was, as many of the early explorers discovered, far from easy. Thus physical obstacles, backed up by a lack of economic incentives, combined to discourage the European from becoming very closely involved in tropical Africa for many centuries—until in fact the age of the great explorers—Mungo Park, Burton, Speke, Livingstone, Stanley and Grenfell among others.

Since most of inter-tropical Africa is warm or hot most of the time, rainfall is usually a more significant factor than temperature in determining growth rates and the seasonal changes of climate. Africa has some very wet areas with more than 2000 and even 3000 mm of rain per annum, as in the Guinea coastlands and the Congo basin. It also has some very dry areas, including the largest of the earth's hot deserts in the Sahara, and extensive arid and semi-arid regions in the southern hemisphere in the Kalahari and its associated semi-deserts. Between the very wet and the markedly dry there are extensive areas with between 750 and 1500 or 1800 mm per annum, often marked by great seasonality and with considerable variations from year to year as well as from one month to another: variability of rainfall that was a fundamental cause of the costly failure of the East African Groundnut Scheme in the years immediately following the Second World War when the anticipated rains in central Tanganyika failed to come, not just for one but for two or three years in succession.

The vegetation map reflects many of these climatic contrasts: between the extensive equatorial rainforest of the wetter areas and the desert conditions of the dry areas is the enormous area of wooded and dry savanna. Sometimes trees predominate over grass, often grass is supreme apart from the occasional stunted trees that somehow withstand the ravages of fire which afflict such areas every year, especially towards the end of the dry season. Where cultivation may be difficult, the rearing of livestock is often possible, though not usually where the tsetse fly flourishes and is the source of trypanosomiasis— or *nagana* to use the earlier Swahili word.

Generalization about soils is dangerous, but often they are very thin, many are most infertile, lacking in particular vital plant nutrients: and soil erosion adversely affects all too easily many areas where cultivation and stock-raising are thus made more difficult if not quite impossible.

Relief, climate, natural vegetation, soils, tsetse fly and other causes of disease—these and other factors constitute the physical environment in which the peoples of Africa live. There is tremendous variety: there are areas that are too high for cultivation, and areas that are too low-lying and poorly drained; rainfall may be much too heavy, too erratic or too rare; the vegetation can be too dense for penetration, too tangled for easy clearing or too sparse to encourage any agricultural activities; there are areas with good grass cover but so tsetse-infested that the rearing of domestic livestock is out of the question; and there are districts that seem quite well suited to settlement but prove to be highly vulnerable to the invasion of locusts or to occasional aridity or to any of the vagaries of a nature that sometimes seems to be even more capricious in tropical Africa than it often is in other parts of the world.

The drawbacks of the physical environment have been stressed because it is often felt that we ignore them too much in our teaching, especially of some of the less

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developed areas of the earth's surface. The Developing World is only now developing, and that only at a very slow pace, because there are so many environmental hazards. Let no one imagine that all it needs is a reasonable quantity of American dollars, or Russian tractors, or British or French technical expertise. It does need these things—it needs them urgently—but they must be applied within the framework laid down by the environment and in the full realization of what is involved thereby and the difficulties that face those who would overcome these obstacles. Is there not a challenge to all of us geography teachers here, a challenge to face the facts and at the same time to spell out the nature of the problems?

What are the "possibilities"—to use the phrase much loved by a school of human geographers in France—of the tropical environment in terms of human development through agriculture, the exploitation of other resources and the development of manufacturing industry?

Since I am not attempting to be comprehensive, I shall do little more than summarize. I shall certainly not elaborate on matters such as shifting cultivation, with which you must all be familiar, or the merits and demerits in African society of the introduction of plantation methods of agriculture. I will just remind you of the vastness of the area over which shifting cultivation in its varying forms still exists, giving rise in economic terms to nothing more elaborate than subsistence farming, whether in the equatorial rainforests or in the savanna forests and grasslands. It is a system that is all right so far as it goes, satisfactory for many societies where the density of population is low and the amount of new land for cultivation is considerable: satisfactory too so long as no one wants to grow anything other than food crops and everyone is happy for land to be allocated seasonally on a tribal basis rather than long term for individual ownership. But within this large area in tropical Africa where subsistence agriculture is still supreme there are, fortunately for the continent's economic future, areas in which cash crops can be grown, often without any damage to the food-producing capacity of the areas concerned. For climatic and other reasons that you all know and teach, cocoa has flourished in Ghana and in other parts of West Africa. Coffee now makes the Ivory Coast the world's third producer though its output is minute compared with that of Brazil. The oil palm that grows in the forest lands of West Africa and the Congo Basin—and in the great Unilever concessions of the former Huileries du Congo Belge in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo—produces palm oil and palm kernels, while groundnuts are grown in a great belt crossing the savannas from Gambia to the northern parts of Nigeria and beyond. In passing we must note, however, that all these oilseeds face the keenest competition from oilseeds produced elsewhere, such as soya bean, as well as from animal fats like whale oil: in other words some of them may not be particularly valuable as cash crops and their future as bases for economic development for these developing countries is by no means assured. This is even true of sisal in which East Africa—Kenya and Tanzania—has almost a world monopoly, but there are other fibres in competition with sisal that could ruin its markets. Tea equally comes from many other parts of the world besides Kenya and Malawi, and Africa's total production of cotton is relatively small. Indeed in world terms perhaps only the Sudan really matters, and there production is concentrated in the very special area of the irrigated Gezira, between the Blue and White Nile Rivers above Khartoum. In the context of our teaching economic geography systematically, tropical Africa will play quite a minor part, so far as agriculture is concerned. Tropical Africa needs the rest of the world—for manufactured goods, for

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technical expertise, and for financial aid—much more than the rest of the world needs tropical Africa as a source of food and other agricultural commodities. But if we are seeking to teach the problems of the Developing World, if we are underlining the obstacles that many of these countries are facing in the highly competitive and rapidly evolving world of today, we must emphasize the little that is being done even if it must sometimes look as if we were grasping at straws and making much of relatively little. These are after all the facts—these are what our pupils must know if they are to be the responsible citizens of the future who will face up to the challenges of the underdevelopment of the Developing World.

Faced with seemingly insoluble agricultural problems, it is tempting to look for economic solutions in other directions, in, for example, the development of manufacturing industry or the exploitation of the mineral deposits known to exist in various parts of tropical Africa, though usually widely scattered and only rarely in the concentrations that are characteristic of some other parts of the world.

Apart from hydro-electricity, Africa's supplies of power seemed very meagre before the discoveries of oil in that part of Nigeria most affected by the tragic civil war so recently ended. Yet in terms of potential, Africa ranks with Latin America as the greatest source of hydro-electricity, though as yet there are only a small number of schemes that are actually producing electric power. So far as former British Africa is concerned, the major schemes are, in chronological order, the Owen Falls Dam in Uganda with the enormous Lake Victoria as its natural reservoir and Jinja its associated industrial centre; the Kariba Dam on the Zambezi supplying power northward to Zambia for the mines of the Copperbelt and for towns like Lusaka, and southward to Rhodesia, particularly Salisbury and Bulawayo; the Akosombo Dam on the Volta, part of the multi-purpose Volta River Project, which has created in Lake Volta with a surface area of 8482 $km^2$ what is claimed as the largest man-made lake in the world; and the Kainji Dam on the River Niger, completed early in 1969 as the first phase in the next power project for Nigeria. Zambia is working hard on a Kafue Dam which may be completed in 1971 and which will act as a supplement, or an alternative, to Kariba in the event of any further deterioration in the political situation. Elsewhere in Africa there are important schemes, as in Cameroon and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The effect of all these projects is, however, essentially regional and therefore limited in scope. Even a great programme like that in Ghana affects directly only part of the country. The power supplied will be principally for existing mining and urban centres in the southern third of the country and for the aluminium industry that is being developed by an American consortium at the new port of Tema. If irrigation projects are developed for the lake, they will be centred in the Accra Plains in the southeastern corner of Ghana. Navigation services may indirectly assist the remote northern districts by, for example, reducing transport costs on imported goods, and the encouragement of commercial fisheries in the lake for those whose farms have been drowned beneath the water may eventually increase the protein content of the diets for many Ghanaians; but it will be the relatively affluent southerner rather than the poverty-stricken northerner who will benefit most.

In the same way the working of minerals influences only relatively small areas and numbers despite the considerable migrations for which some of these mineral developments are often responsible. Ironically enough, the mining and industrial area of greatest significance in the whole of Africa, that of the Witwatersrand centred on

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the city of Johannesburg, lies just outside the Tropics in the northern part of the Republic of South Africa. There are important mineral resources in West Africa, notably iron ore in the westernmost countries, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea (which also has bauxite), gold, industrial diamonds, manganese and (potentially) bauxite in Ghana, and tin, coal of low grade and oil in Nigeria. East Africa has some isolated minerals, and there is an important metalliferous belt extending from Katanga in the southern part of the Congo basin through Zambia to Rhodesia.

Perhaps Zambia will serve to illustrate the contrast between extra-tropical mining and industrial development on a really large scale, as in South Africa, and the lack of such development in most tropical areas for, despite the dominance of its economy by the copper mines, and vital though the developments in the Copperbelt have been, large tracts of the country are quite unaffected. In a total area that is three and a half times that of Great Britain the Copperbelt itself covers less than 10 400 km$^2$ and has living in it only half a million people, about 14 per cent of the total population of Zambia. In many areas outside the Copperbelt crop production remains the main concern of the people: there has, for example, been a remarkable increase in the output of maize in recent years so that food storage in great depots and silos is now needed in a country that only a few years ago suffered considerably and regularly from food shortage towards the end of each dry season. There is also tobacco production from farms that were initially all European-owned along the line of rail. Over much of the country livestock survive with difficulty because of tsetse infestation. Communications constitute a further obstacle to development since Zambia's only rail links with the outside world are southward through Rhodesia or northward into Congo and then Portuguese Angola, until the completion of the Tanzam line to Dar es Salaam on the Indian Ocean which the Chinese are going to build at a cost that is expected to be at least £100 million. Zambia thus epitomizes very well the position of many of the young independent African states of today, with its tremendous contrasts between the considerable economic potentiality of limited districts, such as the Copperbelt, and the almost insuperable problems of economic and social development over vast areas elsewhere.

Any assessment of the economic potential of the tropics in Africa that is realistic must also be low—and disappointing, therefore, in terms of the development of the developing countries of Africa. Basically the future must, it seems to me, lie in agriculture, the occupation of more than two-thirds of the working population today, and likely to remain so at least in the foreseeable future. But it is an agriculture that needs to be transformed, even revolutionized, if it is to cope adequately with the present population and to contribute anything towards the highly desirable improvement in standards of living, let alone do something to help to feed the rapidly growing populations of many of these countries where, before the end of the century, there will be at least double the number of people that there are at present.

Can we therefore identify some of the challenges of tropical Africa at the present time? Let me restrict myself to three of very differing kinds. First, there is a challenge to the African peoples themselves. They have to be ready to accept change—changes that may be far-reaching, changes in their methods of farming, and changes too in the organization of their society. They must be ready to help themselves: they cannot just stand and wait while assistance is brought to them from without. Perhaps most urgent (and most difficult) is the need to accept some measure of family planning and of population control. Only thus can the Malthusian tendency to build up to the limit of resources be avoided: only thus can standards of living be improved and adequate

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social security be established, including the all-important provision of education of all types and at all levels.

Secondly, there is a challenge to scientists and technologists everywhere, in Africa and outside the continent. It always strikes me as incredible that, in a world in which science and technology have taken us so far and so fast, the contribution that they have made to the improvement of food production and to the mastery of the physical environment of the Tropics is so small. Such research as has been done has been concentrated upon cash crops, particularly those that can be exported—cocoa, coffee, tea, sisal and the like. Too little time and money have been devoted to the basic problems of food production and to the potentialities—and the limitations—of the African farmer himself. Great schemes for mechanization—as in the East African Groundnut Scheme—have been introduced among people whose knowledge of implements hitherto has been confined to the hoe and the axe. Too little thought has been given to fundamental problems such as the maintenance of soil fertility, the rotation of crops and the prevention of soil erosion. Fortunately there are some who are aware of what is needed. There are the pessimists like René Dumont who stigmatized all that the European has done in Africa by the title of one of his books, *False start in Africa*: but there is also a school of thought that believes in what is called "intermediate technology"—the provision of implements and skills that are appropriate to the technical ability and stage of development of the farmers concerned. But it is, note, technology: it calls for a scientific approach to the special and peculiar problems of the tropical environment. It is a challenge to scientists and technologists—a challenge to get their priorities right and to solve some at least of these problems that ought not to be beyond the wit of scientific man in this day and age. Technical and financial aid from the West is not going to be very helpful to the Third World unless it can be applied in a meaningful and purposeful manner, and this means that we must understand and appreciate the environment much more than we do at present.

Thirdly, the challenge of the Tropics is to the rest of the world—and not just to humanity at large in a vague and general kind of way but to you and me as teachers, as citizens and as taxpayers in this country. Geography as well as common sense suggest, surely, that it is absurd that in the last third of the twentieth century there should still be a Rich World and a Poor World, with haves and have-nots, with progress and stagnation, with affluence and poverty existing side by side in constant contact and, potentially, in dangerous conflict with one another. Yet these are the facts—these are the facts that you and I, if we are honest and down-to earth geographers, must teach. And no matter how much we may proclaim the virtues of internationalism and preach the gospel of the unity of mankind, the fact is that the gap between the haves and have-nots is widening, not narrowing. The rich become richer while the poor, relatively speaking, become poorer. Only by a much greater and more even sharing of the good things of life can the situation be changed, and it will only be substantially and effectively altered if there is a massive injection of men, money and materials from the Developed World into the Developing World.

This leads directly, of course, from fundamental geography to dynamic politics. Yet ultimately all these matters *must* become political if there is to be action on the scale that the size of the problems demands. It is not just a case of climbing on a bandwagon or chanting slogans like "War on want", "Trade not aid" or "1 per cent of G.N.P. for overseas aid and development". There must be a real internationally-mounted war on world poverty, there must be aid as well as trade (not mutually

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exclusive), there must be a far greater allocation of national wealth to technical aid programmes; there must in short be the wholesale involvement of the more fortunate in the affairs of those who have been less well endowed by nature. The problem of "teaching the Tropics" is not, as I see it, an academic matter that we ignore or solve according to our particular whim or interest or the dictates of the Examination Board that is said to determine our teaching syllabus. Rather the problem of the Developing World is something that must be solved because it needs to dominate our thought increasingly and to compel us to fight for certain kinds of action. Unless we face the facts—unless, for example, we recognize the appallingly low standard of living and income levels that exist over, say, the greater part of East Africa,—unless we recognize the absurdity as well as the inhumanity of the contrast that is likely to develop during the next thirty years between the Third World and the rest of the world—whether capitalist or communist—unless we note these things we shall be failing in our duty as citizens as well as geographers. Let us develop our concepts, postulate our theories, play our geographical games, and adopt any and every gimmick we can think of, but never let it be said of us that as geographers we ignore the facts, whether they be quantifiable or not, or that we turn away from the realities of world situations, however harsh and alarming they may sometimes seem to be. "Teaching the Tropics", somehow, somewhere, is something that each one of us must do, at every level in education, if we are to be both truly scientific and truly humanitarian.

The thoughts that I would leave with you are summed up in two recent statements. The first is from Mr. Lester Pearson: "No problem faced by mankind is in the long run more menacing than the division of the world into opposing camps of rich and poor." The second comes from Bishop Trevor Huddleston who, before becoming Bishop of Stepney, was Bishop of the Masasi diocese of Tanzania with its scattered population of underprivileged people with virtually no involvement in the world economy: "The issue of the gulf between the haves and the have nots of the earth . . . can be regarded either as a vast, almost insoluble problem, or an equally vast, but very splendid opportunity." Can we by making the effort to teach the Tropics—by accepting its educational challenge—do a little to turn an insoluble problem into a splendid opportunity?

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